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Silence: The experiences of Sebastian Rodrigues, SJ

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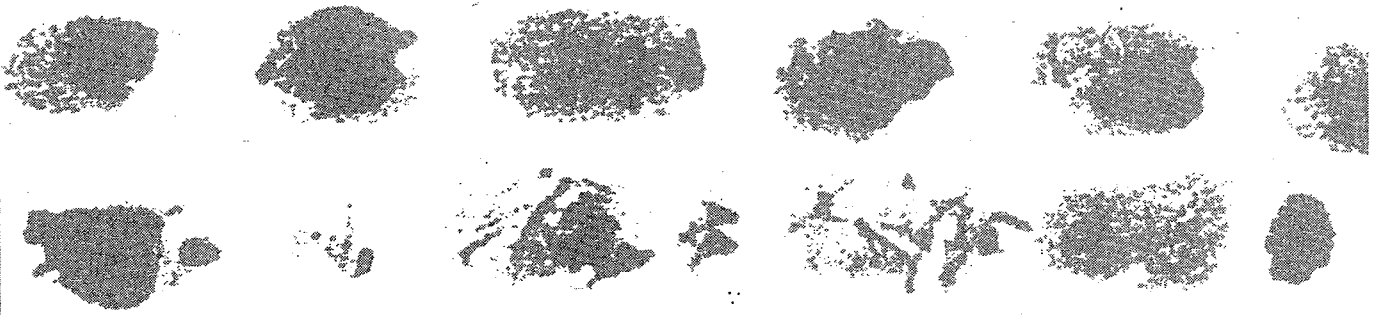
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Glenn Morrison, SVD.

Silence: The Experiences of Sebastian Rodrigues, SJ.

Glenn Morrison SVD was born 17th March, 1969 in Sydney, Australia. He attended Sydney Grammar School. After his schooling, he went to Macquarie University, Sydney and completed in 1990 a Bachelor of Economics majoring in Accounting. In 1992, Glenn entered the Divine Word Missionaries, and took first vows in February, 1994. Glenn is currently studying as a clerical student at Yarra Theological Union, Melbourne, Australia. Poetry has been a passion of Glenn's for many years.

The poem, *Silence: The Experience of Sebastian Rodrigues, SJ*, is written as a reflection and meditation on the book *Silence*, by Endō Shūsaku. The poem describes emotively the life in Japan of the missionary priest, Fr. Sebastian Rodrigues, SJ. He had left Portugal with two other priests, Francisco Garrpe and Juan de Santa Marta, to investigate the truth of whether Fr. Christovao Ferreira, their former teacher, had apostatized or experienced glorious martyrdom. It was impossible for these three young Jesuits to believe that Ferreira had apostatized; in their belief they represented the clergy of Portugal (Endō 1976, 19-32).

The poem is set in the year 1627 when the Jesuits learn of Ferreira's apostasy. The three Jesuits arrive in Macao in 1638. They meet Fr. Valignano, rector of the missionary college of Macao, who warns them of the dangers of going to Japan, and who eventually and reluctantly gives them permission to enter Japan. Juan de Santa Marta becomes too sick to go

and is left behind. Rodrigues and Garrpe set sail secretly for Japan with a drunken and untrustworthy Japanese man, Kichijiro, whom they had met in Macao (26-48).

The poem has the blended form of an epic with personal, emotive and creative, prosaic language. Only the last verse in the poem has a metrical structure; it is in the Japanese style of haiku (having seventeen syllables). The poem is broken up in to seven parts.

The poem has many allusions to creation: cherry blossom flowers, mountains, rivers, breezes, storms, rain, spring, butterflies, cicadas and swamps.

The symbol of the cherry blossom flowers is used throughout the poem. In Japanese culture there is the mystery of the cherry blossom. A poem by Motoori Norinaga illustrates this mystery:

*Those eager voices
Demanding the soul of
many-isled Japan...*

Lead them to the
 mystery of
 cherry-blossom
 And the golden
 light
 Of morning over
 mountains (Hettinger 1988).

This poem encouraged me to use the imagery of the cherry blossom flowers in the poem on the book *Silence*. During the poem the cherry blossom flowers begin to wither, die and cast no shadow. Eventually the flowers become like ghosts which haunt Rodrigues. Only when Rodrigues apostatizes are the cherry blossom flowers reborn. I have used the mystery of the cherry blossom to point out how Christianity fails to take root in Japan; this is emotively and touchingly pointed out by the verse, "*The cherry blossom flowers cast no shadow for they have died.*" Christ can symbolize the cherry blossom. Only at the end when Rodrigues has apostatized to save the Japanese Christians in the pit do the cherry blossom flowers "smile; and embrace the mountain air."

Endō Shūsaku in his novel *Silence*, points out that Christianity can never become embedded in Japan because Japan is like a swamp, and Christianity when planted, fails to take root; and then rots away. This theme is portrayed constantly in the poem *Silence: The Experience of Sebastian Rodrigues*. Other images are of Christianity as a torn and frail outer garment, and also a butterfly caught in a spider's web.

A criticism of Endō Shūsaku is that he fails to see that life exists in a swamp.¹ A lotus flower, a symbol of peace and beauty, grows in a swamp. I think it is possible for Christianity to

be a lotus flower in the "swamp of Japan." There has been a lot of suffering and martyrdom in the past in Japan. Perhaps the seeds of Christianity have already been planted by the martyrs of Japan.

The poem also centers on the hidden Christians, the *kakure Kiri-shitan*. The martyrdom of Mokichi and Ichizo has a forming and lasting affect on Rodrigues as does the martyrdom of his companion, Garrpe. The hidden Christians are courageous and pious who have caught their faith more than they have been taught it. They are "attuned to symbols" and have a great love and devotion to Mary (Glynn 1989, 24-30). It is the hidden Christians who help to change the motive of Rodrigues's mission. In the swamp of Japan it is Rodrigues's love for the Christians which helps to change his life.

The theme of apostasy and its implications is illustrated in the poem. Does apostasy mean not being a Christian? The paradox for Rodrigues is that after his apostasy he experiences a deeper intimacy with Christ. Is Rodrigues a hero or a heretic to be rejected? Rodrigues experiences deeply the sufferings and turmoils of life and faces the fear of death constantly; stepping on the *fumie* exemplifies his suffering.

Rodrigues is a man weakened by his struggle with faith and his long imprisonment. He tries to live the Paschal Mystery, but is conquered by the swamp of Japan; this is pointed out to Rodrigues by Inoue, the Lord of Chikugo. Rodrigues's failure is poignant, and he cannot save all the hidden Christians; moreover, his presence becomes a hindrance to them. Apostasy for Rodrigues is to end in the way that it ended for his teacher,

Ferreira; both are caught to live and breathe in the Japanese swamp in their smouldering Christianity.

In the poem, the person of Kichijiro, "the cowardly and tragic apostate," symbolizes the utter poverty of Rodrigues and Garpe. Kichijiro plays on Rodrigues's guilt and shame; he desperately clings on to Rodrigues's torn and frail, outer garment.

The form of persuasion used by the Japanese authorities is subtle and piercing. Ferreira tragically symbolizes this form of persuasion. The suffering and pain of Ferreira is illustrated by his words, "*I am speaking out of the silence of my existence.*"

The silence of God is a theme throughout the poem. "The deep silence of God" which has embedded itself in Ferreira clings onto and disturbs Rodrigues. The silence causes "the spirits of the cherry blossom flowers" to "mourn and mourn, and sob and sob."

The key lines of the poem are expressed in the haiku verse at the

end:

*"spring's sweet scent arrives
rivers sing and dance
and a man prays in silence."*

The first line has the symbolic meaning that life continues; the second that there is still joy and happiness amidst suffering, and the third that the presence of God can never sink in the swamp of Japan. Hope always exists for people to embrace God. Perhaps it is Rodrigues, Okada San'emon, who is praying.

Overall, the poem *Silence: The Experience of Sebastian Rodrigues, S.J.*, is a reflection upon the experience of mission in persecution especially in the person of Rodrigues, the failure of Christianity to take root in Japan, the consequences of apostasy, the tragic plight of the hidden Christians, and the silence of God. The poem is also a prayer to God for the Japanese people.

Silence: The Experience of Sebastian Rodrigues, SJ

I

A wretched and grievous storm belching forth from Japan,
pierces and harries the missionary hearts
of Catholic Portugal. The passionate storm,
suppressed and cursed with open wounds,
explodes in anger crying,
*"You have trespassed upon the souls of Japan.
You have misjudged our smiles and golden light.
You have not tasted the morning sweetness
over the mountains.
The road is long, too long, for you have no friends.
Never have you savored the Mystery of the Cherry Blossom.
Leave us, leave us O barren one.
We have no taste for your ugly face and wisdom."*

A stirring breeze, imbued with the spirit
of martyred and apostate Christians, sobs and sobs
through the Jesuit walls and corridors
in Portugal and her dominions.

Rodrigues and Garrpe are pierced by the stirring breeze.
The desolating tears of Rachel lamenting for her children,
sheer desolating tears, sting and plague the hearts
of these wild-surmising missionaries
as they envisage their mentor and teacher,
their friend and confrere, Christovao Ferreira.

The name, Ferreira, echoes poignantly
in the darkness of disbelief.
The mind of Rodrigues questions
and searches for truth
whilst groping in anguish.

In the swamp of Japan,
the apostate Ferreira,
lives conquered and subdued
in his dirty and decaying outer garment;
his inner being is empty and cries dry tears.
Listening to the cry of the cicada,
Ferreira grieves and grieves at the silence of God.

In the village of Tomogi, the hidden Christians,
the *kakure Kirishitan* (Harrington 1993, xiv), planted in the swamp of Japan,
pray their *Pater Noster* and *Ave Maria* in hope.
Portuguese and Latin words, "*Deus*," "*Angelus*," "*Beato*" and
"*parais*" and "*inferno*," color their Christian language;
foreign, pierced, apostatized, martyred and loved.
The Jiisama, the Baptist, and the Tossama, the catechist,
bind these humble and committed Christians together.
The *kakure Kirishitan* are singing.
Listen, listen to their song.

Our lives, the Spring;
Our hearts, the flowers;
Our tears, the rain.

O Jesus, may Spring be filled with cherry blossoms,
radiant in wonder and grace.
O Lord, may the flowers be touched with tenderness,

everlasting and blooming.

*O God, may the rain fall gently, softly
upon the mountains, villages and rivers.*

*We are praying, we are praying,
we are praying at the temple of paradise.
Let us open our hearts to Christ,
and find in Him the meaning of hope and life.*

II

Rodrigues, Garrpe, and their guide,
the cowardly and tragic apostate, Kichijiro,
are greeted warmly by the words,
“*Padre, Padre.*”

In the village of Tomogi, near Nagasaki,
the missionaries have been disguised
and hidden secretly; they are hidden,
yet not *Kirishitan*, but Christian.

Welcomed and prized by the peasants and fisherfolk
of Goto, Kichijiro's village, Rodrigues the missionary
finds purpose and experiences well-being and awe.
However, alas for Rodrigues,
alas more for the *kakure Kirishitan*;
the guards and officials have come,
have come to ransack Goto,
and the Christians are sinking, sinking slowly
into the somber Japanese swamp clinging to torn
and peasant garments of the Jesuit missionaries,
alive, apostatized and martyred.

The village of Tomogi is harried
by a gentle and cunning samurai.
Three hostage sacrifices are demanded;
silence numbs and wounds the hidden Christians.
Mokichi and Ichizo with their expressionless
and secret faces volunteer, whilst the coward, Kichijiro,
in utter weakness is compelled, forced to accept.

The *fumie*, the symbol of apostasy,
haunts and haunts the souls of Mokichi and Ichizo.

Helpless and frightened, Rodrigues and Garrpe
repress their anxiety and await in fear.

Mokichi and Ichizo confess their belief in *Deus*
and are condemned to martyrdom.
Kichijiro, having trampled upon the *fumie*,
declared the Blessed Virgin a whore,
and letting fall his insulting spittle upon the crucifix,
saves his life, and falls, falls into despair;
self-hating despair.

Whilst the Lord of Chikugo, Inoue, celebrates
his victory over the *kakure Kirishitan*,
two pitiful, poor farmers or fishermen are fastened
upon a cross on the shore at low tide.

The cherry blossom flowers are withering,
and cast a mournful, unhappy shadow.

Attacking silently the faith of Rodrigues,
the drenching and indifferent waves
martyr the two peasants thirsting for paradise.

The Temple of Paradise, the great Temple,
filled with Christians hidden and martyred
scorns and jeers at Rodrigues crying,
"*Where, where is your God?*"

III.

Parting company, the spirits of Rodrigues and Garrpe.
united in their dreams, light a Christian candle

in the Shinto and Buddhist soul of the Japanese.
A crow circles Rodrigues; it caws ominously,
and too soon is the candle light of hope extinguished.

Singing hoarsely in the woods,
a cicada unmask the silence that everywhere abounds.
The stirring silence of God plagues
the bewildered heart of Rodrigues.
Engulfed in trepidation and doubt,
the mind of Rodrigues finds voice
in the absurd illusion of God's non-existence.
Wandering in the desolate mountains of Japan,
Rodrigues is nauseated in spirit

and emaciated in faith.

He is fighting to live in the Gospel of Christ,
and combatting God's silence to stay alive.

Kichijiro, the apostate coward and fallen Christian,
finds the *padre*, the Jesuit living in violent emotion.
They console and torment, and soothe and curse
each other's tragic and wounded hearts and souls.

In the mud swamp with Judas Iscariot,
Kichijiro cries, "Father, Father forgive me,"
and betrays, betrays, betrays
his Christ, Rodrigues, for pieces of silver.

The cherry blossom flowers cast no shadow
for they have died.

IV.

The silent journey of subtle and gentle persuasion
to apostasy begins. Encountering the old samurai of Tomogi,
Rodrigues questions God and breathes tensely.
The cutting and consternating words of the samurai,
"It is because of you that they must suffer" (Endo 1976, 142).
disturb and molest the fragility of Rodrigues.
Again, the missionary priest is besieged.
A Japanese interpreter speaking Portuguese
debates the Christian faith,
and in frustration breathes a deep sigh and cries,
*"If you do not apostatize, then the peasants,
the fisherfolk, the 'kakure Kirishitan'
will be suspended in the pit."*

Hearing the name, "*Inoue*,"
the sharp and shrewd magistrate
and champion of the apostates,
and the mournful words,
"Fathers Porro, Pedro, Cassola and Father Ferreira" (15),
the *padre* shakes and trembles in helpless fear.

Hearing the name, "*Ferreira*," the silence of God
Vanquishes his prayer and agonizes his heart.
The alarming voice of Father Valignano from Macao,

warning of perils and dangers, trespasses his mind
with self-hating thoughts of failure.

In prison with the hidden Christians,
Rodrigues escapes the silence to be a priest,
and is consoled by the gentle and compassionate
eyes of Christ. Soon Jesus is crying,
and Rodrigues is asleep unaware of these tears.
A cicada cries, and sings in the silence of God.

The *padre* is interviewed by a stout, old man;
he questions this process of persuasion
whilst his hidden Christians, prisoners, are listening.
Emotion swells and rises in Rodrigues
whilst discovering this stout, old man is Inoue,
the Governor of Chikugo laughing in front of him.

Listening to a song of martyrs,
a requiem for the cherry blossom flowers,
the priest reflects naively upon his courage and mission.

The respite never ends; Kichijiro,
a dreadful symbol of guilt
struggling in the swamp of Japan,
is back, back pleading forgiveness
and crying for absolution.

He is whimpering like a dog;
he is filthy with foul stench;
and persists in clinging upon
the torn and thin outer garment
of his angry and tormented priest.
Kichijiro is forgiven and rejected.

Once again the face of Christ appears,
but wet with tears; Rodrigues facing
the gentle eyes of Christ,
falls into feelings of disgrace and shame.
There is only silence and grief,
and how the spirits of the cherry blossom flowers
mourn and mourn, and sob and sob!

Hanging on to live the paschal mystery,
the faith of the *padre* is assaulted by Inoue.
Judging for the people and soul of Japan,
Inoue declares Christianity barren,
an intolerable burden and a forcing of love.

The subtle persuasion, eating the faith of Rodrigues,
draws him ever closer to apostasy.
In prison, he becomes distant and barren.
The lifeless voice of the cicada goes on relentlessly.

V.

Images of martyrdom fall before the *padre's* mind;
the martyrs are peasants, wretched and miserable,
and clothed in meagre rags; their martyred faces
look, stare in anguish at the poor priest
living in the subtle hands of Inoue.

In a black kimono with sunken eyes,
Ferreira the apostate encounters Rodrigues the priest.
A shameful look, and then a challenging smile
greets Rodrigues in shock and exhaustion.

A deep wound has tamed the soul of Ferreira.
A glistening white tear in his eye,
the deep silence of God,
evoke rue and lament within Rodrigues.

Ferreira, no longer Ferreira, but Sawano Chuan,
shackled in his apostate state,
voices his new mission to *padre* Rodrigues:
to make him apostasize. The evils of the pit,
the agony of hell, are explained.
The words of Sawano, "Isn't your life useless,"
burn the *padre's* heart with scorn and bitterness.

Wearing a mask and repressing emotion, Sawano argues,
*Japan is a swamp, a more shocking and dangerous swamp,
than ever could be imagined. We had planted the sapling
of Christianity, and see how it rots and decomposes.
Their God has never, never been the Christian God."*
In the wisdom of defeat, Sawano continues,
*"I am speaking out of the silence of my existence.
Listen, and know the storms that break upon the mountains.
The religion of the Deus is like a butterfly
trapped in a spider's web.
Too soon is the butterfly consumed;
only a skeleton remains to haunt our dreams
and mock the God we profess in faith.
There is no happiness; there is no peace.*

*Only in silence do I notice the cherry blossoms,
yet I never, nor can, experience them.*

*I am Sawano Chuan who has received and accepted
the wife and children of an executed man."*

The silence of God in the lonely and cloudy skies,
in the gentle breezes and snow-covered mountains
weeps, and yearns for love and affection.

VI.

In the thick, dark solitude of a prison cell
reeking with foul and shocking stench,
Rodrigues remembers with a howling passion
the martyrdom of Garrpe,
his companion and Christ-like friend,
who never abandoned the Christians.

Languishing in shame and fear of death,
the *padre* is disturbed by Kichijiro

asking, crying for confession and absolution.
Living in a vicious circle,
Kichijiro's cries are unheard,
and his sins are forgiven.

In the unrelenting swamp of Japan,
a *padre* is groping.
The memory of Peter's denial of Jesus,
and the cock crowing,
desolate the missionary's mind.

A snoring is heard,
sounding like a windmill turning in the breeze.
This terrible and deranging noise
pierces Rodrigues with torment.
How he feels his life is trifled and mocked!
Berserk and raging, the *padre* beats wildly
on the prison wall.

Sawano and the interpreter surmise the pitiful *padre*.
In consternation, Rodrigues learns from Sawano
that the noise is not snoring,
but groans, moans of Christians hanging in the pit.

Scattered in the souls of the martyred
and apostate Christians,

the spirits of the cherry blossom flowers
howl and scream, and abruptly vanish.

Sawano, reliving his apocalyptic past in Rodrigues,
explains how hearing the terrible, tormenting groans
had brought him to apostasy, to tread on the *fumie*.

Sawano holds the preciousness of life
in front of Rodrigues and remains silent.
The silence is suddenly broken with Sawano's words,
"*Certainly Christ would have apostasized for them*" (268).

The *fumie* is brought,
and Rodrigues is numb with dejection.
The most painful act of love begins.

Raising his aching foot above the *fumie*,

Rodrigues sees Christ and hears his cry,
"*Trample, trample, trample.*"

I know your pain.
I was born in the world to be trampled upon.
I carried my cross to share your suffering."
and the cock crows in the awaking dawn.

VII.

Living in the illusion of self-deception,
and a ragged cloak of weakness,
the apostate Paul in the swamp of Japan
hears once more the confession of Kichijiro,
and bids him go in peace.

In the love of Jesus,
a new and different love,
Rodrigues the priest,
Okada San'emon,
journeys on no longer
in the silence of God.

The cherry blossoms are reborn;
they smile at and embrace the mountain air.

Spring's sweet scent arrives
rivers sing and dance
and a man prays in silence.

ENDNOTES

1. This criticism came from Fr. Jim Knight SVD, Provincial Superior of the SVD's in Australia. The example of the lotus flower is my own exemplification of Fr. Jim's criticism.

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